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In  
Inaugural Dissertation  
on  
Anasarca,  
by Charles Vignhart  
~~Charles Vignhart~~  
of  
Virginia.

admitted March 10. 1819.

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Before entering fully upon the subject of this Dissertation, I shall premise a few observations on Dropsy taken in a general sense, & enumerate some of the various forms & appearances, which it assumes in the human System. Dropsy has engaged the attention of the Physician ever since the dawn of Medical Science, and numerous are the opinions which have been advanced by authors respecting its Phenomena and its Cure. Without searching after the old & exploded doctrines of the ancient writers on the Subject, I shall only advert to those, whose opinions are of modern date; & whose doctrines are canvassed & examined by the medical Literati in this enlightened State of our Science.

Darwin, an ingenious but speculative writer, attributes the Disease in question to a retrograde action of the absorbent vessels, supposing that the vessels with which they are supplied, become paralytic, and did not close sufficiently to prevent the reurgitation of their contents.

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-lines of this humoral Pathology, entertained the Ideas, that Dropsy was produced by weakness of the Blood, which debility, was owing to an immoderate depletion from the Blood vessels, to chronic disease of long standing, and to the intemperate use of intoxicating Liquors.

The celebrated Cullen, supposed, that Dropsy is the effect of increased effusion or diminished absorption, or in other words a destruction of that Balance in the human System, which is necessary to preserve it in a healthy & vigorous state.

Others have thought, that Dropsy is owing to an inability, or want of due energy in the Kidneys to secrete the urine.

This conclusion was drawn, from the circumstances that there is a paucity of urine in this Disease. As I am not prepared or competent to advance any Speculations on the Theory of this Disease, which would be interesting, or which could lead to any useful practical results, I shall proceed to the consideration of its Symptoms & Cause. Dropsy is defined, "a preternatural collection of Serous, or watery fluids in the different parts or cavities of the Body." It assumes various names, from the different parts of the Body, which fall under its

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Canefat Influence: viz, an effusion in the cavity of the Chest, is termed Hydrothorax; in the Brains, Hydrocephalus, in the abdomen, . Ascites, in the Testes, Hydrocele &c. &c.  
The Species of Dropsy which is the Subject of the present essay, is that denominat<sup>d</sup>. Anasarca. It is a soft inelastic Swelling of the whole Body or some part of it. The Seat of this affection is the cellular membrane. It at first commonly appears in particular parts only, but at <sup>length</sup> frequently extends throughout the whole. In every Stage of its progress, the Swelling is uniform; at first always soft, and yielding upon pressure by the Finger, which forms a pit that remains for some little time after the pressure is removed, but at length rises to its former fulness. It generally makes its first appearance on the lower extremities, and in the last Stage, scarcely to be discovered in the evening. It is usually increased by an erect posture; but some cases have occurred, where it was removed by the exercise of walking.  
The Intumescence, which as I have said above, first affects the lower extremities, at length extends its course upwards, and gradually spreads, untill it has taken possession of the whole

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system. *Proximate Cause.* The proximate cause of Anasarca is a preternatural collection of Serum or watery fluid in the cellular membrane of the Body. It sometimes pervades the Skin itself, & exudes in drops through its pores, or being too viscid to pass through these, it appears in small vesicles on the cuticle. The existence of any other species of Dropsy, arising from causes affecting the system generally, for a great length of time, is commonly associated with Anasarca.

*Symptoms.* Anasarca is marked by scarcity of urine, the small quantity evacuated, being of a high color, and depositing a copious sediment. It is also attended by a great Degree of thirst. In the advanced stage of the disease, the Breathing is Short & Laborious, owing to the pressure of the accumulated fluid on the Diaphragm. This last Symptom is spoken of by Sydenham in his treatise on Dropsy.

The State of the Pulse in Anasarca is so little changed from the healthy Standard, that it turns seldom to attract the notice of Practitioners. The late celebrated Dr Rush, who was a strict observer of the pulse in all Diseases, mentions, in the 2nd Vol. of his Medical Inquiries & Observations,

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### Treatment

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that a hard, full & quick pulse is an attendant symptom of general Dropsy. The morbid excitement which prevails in this disease, differs from that in Inflammatory fevers, by a less degree of febrile heat, and a slighter pain in the head & Limbs.

Treatment. The medical world has called into action a variety of Remedies to effect a cure of this disease. The first which I shall mention is venesection. This valuable and important Remedy seems to have escaped the attention of Cullen, who did not employ it in Anasarca. Believing the system to be in an atonic state during the existence of this disease, he did not resort to the Lancet for its eradication. But the more modern, and celebrated Dr Rush, whose researches have shed a light on this, as well as on many other diseases which afflict the human race, strongly urges the use of the Lancet in what he terms, the Inflammatory stage of Dropsy. His practice was founded upon the view which he formed of the nature of the affection, believing that it is sometimes attended with great arterial action. The efficacy

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of Venesection in the treatment of Anasarca, is also strongly inculcated by Professor Chapman in his Lectures, who advises that the Lancet should be used, as long as Fibrin action is indicated. Emetics have long been prescribed in Anasarca, & their utility, admitted by many practitioners of celebrity. They were used by Cullen with success, and more modern writers have spoken highly of their virtues. Darwin used Emetics in Anasarca, on the principle, that in the operation of a vomit, not only the motions of the Stomach & Duodenum are inverted, but also that of the Lactals & Lymphatics which belong to them, whereby a great quantity of Lymph & Chyle is poured into the Intestines. According to the opinion of a highly distinguished author of our own country, this remedy acts, by abstracting action and excitement from the arterial system, which disposes the Lymphatics to absorb, & discharge large quantities of water. The Emetic medicines, however, we scarcely ever use in this disease, unless it seems to excite active vomiting, except, when the Stomach is much loaded & oppressed by its vitiated contents. Administered in quan-

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likely to excite nausea, they prove serviceable, by promoting  
absorption, & subduing febrile excitement.

The efficacy of Purgatives in the cure of Anasarca has  
been acknowledged by Physicians in all ages & countries.  
They tend to evacuate the excess of fluid by the intestines.

Cullen prefers the Drastic purgatives, as Scammony, Gamboge &c. In this he differs from the practice of Sydenham  
who employed those of a milder kind, & recommends that  
they should be exhibited daily, unless contraindicated by the  
debilitated state of the Patient. In Tonic cases, or those  
attended with increased arterial action or Inflammatory  
Diathesis, the most beneficial results arise from the administra-  
tion of medicines which act briskly on the Intestinal tube.  
In those of an opposite Character, the milder class of Pur-  
gatives, should undoubtedly be preferred. In great con-  
stipation of the Bowels, it was the practice of Sydenham to  
prescribe the Elixarium, which stands at the head of the  
Drastic Species. Too much attention, cannot be paid to  
the State of the Alimentary canal, in the treatment of all  
Diseases. In the one now under my consideration, great

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Torpor of the Bowels frequently exists, which can only be removed by a recourse to Emetics & active cathartics.

Of the class of remedies, diseminated purgatives, no one is now so generally prescribed, & whose exhibition produces such favorable results, as the *Sul. Tart. Potassa*, or *Emet. Tart. Combine* with *Convolv. Scap.* it acts powerfully in promoting absorption, & in evacuating the Serous fluid through the Bowels. Its efficacy in this disease is not confined to modern practice. It has been long used by Practitioners, & its utility is sufficiently testified by Dr. Rush in his own practice. Its good effects are attributed by Professor Chapman to the combinate impulsion which it makes on the Kidneys & Bowels. In the following case which fell under my notice, I was fully satisfied of the great advantage to be derived from the preparations of Potash in the Treatment of Anasarca. Case. J. W. a man of robust habit of Body, aged about 51, had been afflicted with Dropsical effusions for about 2 years from the time I saw him in the month of March 1818. When I visited him, I found him laboring under very alarming symptoms. He was swollen to an enormous size,

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the cellular membrane throughout the whole System seems completely filled with the effused fluid; the Tormentum was much tumefied, & highly inflamed; Dyspnoea very distressing, & the Patient could only lie on his right Side.

I administered a dose of Salap & Cream of Tartar in combination in order to excite the action of the Bowels, which were rather in a constipated state, & also with a view to its Hydragogue effect. Having taken this Stup, I advised, that a consulting Physician should be called. He did not visit him for several days, but prescribed for him Diuretic Medicines, viz. the Sol. Diureticus, & the Nit. Potass. When I saw him a second time with the Physician, the Symptoms if possible were more alarming. Strong symptoms of Sphacelus appeared on this Leg. Not deeming it safe to resort to an operation for drawing off the water, the Practitioner administered large quantities of the Nit. Potass. as a Diuretic, & also the Cream Tart. & Salap. to excite the action of the Intestines. Digitalis was also used in large & repeated doses. The Physician left the house with the decided opinion that the disease was beyond the reach of medicine. But great was his astonish-

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ment, at the expiration of a few days, to learn that the Patient  
was convalescent. I saw him myself, some short time afterwards,  
& found him entirely free from swelling, & every alarming  
symptoms. Considerable debility remained, which was relieved  
by the usual corroborant Medicines, & exercise. In this case,  
the cure was attributed chiefly to the operation of the purga-  
tive medicines, which were exhibited in large & repeated  
doses. Professor Chapman recommends, when the Curren-  
turt, is employed with a view to its Hydragogic effect, it should  
be combined with some other purgative, & that the use of spirits  
should be prohibited. It is given in the dose of  $\mathfrak{zj}$  every  
2 or 3 Hours. The Diaphoretics are by some, considered  
important in the treatment of Hydropic Affections—Guthrie  
attributes their good effects to the power which they possess  
of changing the Skin from the imbibing condition which  
he supposed to exist in this disease, to that of the perspiring.  
As in the Toxic State of Anasarca, there is generally a degree  
of Inflammatory action in the Bloodvessels, this remedy can  
now incline to believe, be prescribed with safety and  
Success. We have the respectable authority of Professor

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Chapman to support us in its administration.

In conflicting with this disorder, sometimes so perplexing to the Practitioner, the Mat. Med. offers a class of remedies which have contributed their aid, in no small degree, to alleviate the Pains, & ameliorate the condition of mankind. The Kidneys afford an outlet for morbid matter which accumulates in the Body, the effect of Debility and disease. By exciting their action, the Urinary Discharge is increased, & for this purpose, a class of medicines presents itself, which are as various in their nature, as beneficial in their effects. I allude to the Diuretics. They are divided into 2 Species, the Linient & the Stimulating. Of the first division, the preparations of Potash hold the highest rank. The Sub Carbonate of Potash has been used by Physicians as a diuretic Remedy. Dr John Pringle employs it in combination with Tonic medicines. The acetate of Potash, also called Sal Diureticus, is spoken highly of by some in the treatment of Dropsical effusions. Professor Chapman does not possess such confidence in its virtues as some other of his Medical Brethren, but thinks it much inferior to some

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Tartar, is also highly recommended in doses of  $\mathfrak{ss}$ , repeated sev-  
eral times in the course of the day. The vitriol Potass is included  
in this Class, & is entitled to some notice. It acts more bene-  
ficially, when Febrile action exists, with Thirst, Pulse, and  
High excitations. The Super Tartar. Potass, or Cream  
Tart. holds the highest claims to the attention of the Prac-  
titioner. Professor Chapman says, that if properly adminis-  
tered, "it will disperse tropical swellings sooner than any  
other medicine." It acts solely on the Kidneys, when dissolved  
in a large quantity of water, & when combined with some  
other purgative has a Hydragogue effect. To obtain the diu-  
retic effects of this medicine in a great degree, large quantities  
of it should be taken. It may be used in solution as a common  
Drink. The Spiritus Nitris Nitrosi, or Sweet Spirit of  
Nitro, has long been admitted into this class of Remedies -  
To the use of Children it is peculiarly adapted. It should be  
given in large doses, as otherwise its Diuretic effects would  
be destroyed by its diaphoretic qualities. Of the domestic  
Medicines which have been found useful in Anasarca, the

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common Passley, the Asparagus, and seed of <sup>the</sup> Braber Melon  
are entitled most to our notice. Of the Stimulating crastive  
Diuretics, I shall first mention the Digitalis, which has ac-  
-quired a conspicuous place in the Materia Medica. The  
Fox Glove was first used by Dr Withering, who in 1785,  
published a pamphlet on its use in Dropsical Affections.  
He was in the habit of combining it with opium, to counter-  
act its purgative effect. It has been supposed by others, that  
its union with opium destroys its diuretic property.

This is an erroneous opinion. The practice is now more  
common than the employment of Digitalis & opium in Com-  
-binations to excite the action of the urinary organs.

Parvin cured anasarca Pulmonum with Foxglove in Deco-  
-tion, given in doses which produced Sickness, frequent Vom-  
-iting, & copious Flow of Urine. This was succeeded by crants  
of Spasms. & the Digitalis was continued for several days,  
which completely relieved the difficulty of Breathing.

There is perhaps, no article in the Materia Medica, concern-  
-ing the use of which more contrariety of opinion prevails,  
than the Digitalis in the treatment of Dropsy. Professor

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Chapman may be mentioned as one of its advocates. He speaks in the most exalted terms of this medicine in Anasarca. But he presents many useful & necessary cautions to the view of the practitioner in its administration. It should never be given, when the pulse is chorded & active, & when there is much strength in the System: but in such cases the Physician should call to his aid the use of the Lancet, & after having reduced the action of the arterial System by this mode, the Digitalis may be advantageously resorted to. When the weak & exhausted State of the System will not admit of active purging, as in Anasarca succeeding to Scarlet Fever, the Digitalis will be found an excellent Substitute for that remedy. Darwin's Formule, which is called the Saturated Tincture is most approved of. In all cases where the Tincture is administered, we should cautiously watch the State of the System, as it in some cases requires sometimes to develop its effects. The best mode, is to begin with small doses, & increase them gradually; and regulate them according to the impression which the medicine makes upon the System. Digitalis was strongly recommended

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by the late Professor Barton in cases of Anasarca.  
Professor Denig, disapproves of the employment of it, when  
great debility of the System is present. The dose as laid  
down in his Syllabus, is from  $\frac{1}{2}$  to 3 Grs of the Powder,  
 $\frac{3}{4}$  of the Decoction, or Infusion, 15 or 20 Grs, of the Tincture,  
& of Darwin's Naturalist tincture 10 to 15 drops. I shall not  
mention the *Silla Mariana* or Squill. The present Professor  
of the practice in this School, in speaking of this medicine,  
says, "as a Diuretic, the Squill is indisputably the most-  
certain, active & useful article we possess." This encomium  
if it may be recalled, on this medicine, would be of itself suffi-  
cient to entitle it new notice, had we no other testimony of its  
power ~~with~~ this disease. It was used by Dr Rush with favorable  
results; & many, eminent in Practice, among whom may be  
mentioned Cullen & Hume, were not strangers to its great diure-  
tic power. It is generally combined with Calomel, when admin-  
istered in Hydroptic Affections. The Polygala Senega, or  
Seneca Snake Root, holds the next rank, & has long been used  
as a Diuretic. It is thought by some, better adapted to cases of  
universal Dropsy, which depend on impaired absorption,

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or are connected with a general cachectic state of the System.  
The Chimaphilla Umbellata, called by our Indians, *Pepespa*,  
has long been used by those tribes as a Diuretic. It has found its  
way into the Practice of the American Physicians. It acts  
powerfully on the Kidneys, & what entitles it to more importance;  
**As at the same time, exercises a tonic effect on the Stomach.**  
There are many other articles of this class, possessing virtues  
somewhat inferior to those which I have mentioned, & which should  
be resorted to by the Practitioner, in cases where the Idiosyncrasy of  
the Patient, or some other cause, prevents the administration  
of the more active medicines. As the Stomach is frequently  
much debilitated in Anasarca, it is necessary that we should  
administer medicines of the Tonic class, as the Peruvian Bark,  
Chalybeate Preparations &c. an infusion of Aromatics with  
Tonics, have a tendency to strengthen the tone of the Stom-  
ach. The cold Bath is advised by Cullen, who says it  
has proved beneficial in his practice. Dr Klaproth of this  
City, in his practice at the Almshouse, has used a Bath  
of Salt water with success, in dispersing Anasarca. Smelling  
while the Patient is immersed in the Bath, he directs that

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effusion should at the same time be made on the head. This remedy acts by increasing the action of the absorbent vessels, & by invigorating the whole system. An opinion long obtained among Physicians, that the use of Liquids was injurious in this disease, & they consequently prohibited them in all cases. Among this number was the celebrated Sydenham, who has handed down to posterity many useful practical precepts in the Science of medicine. But the old maxim, "humani est errare" is applicable here, & that this Luminary to the Profession has unquestionably erred in his practice in this disease, is amply proven by the success of the opposite mode of treatment. So far was Cullen from subscribing to this opinion, that he asserts, that the use of Liquids sometimes cures the disease. The best & most experienced Practitioners of our own country also condemn this strict abstinence & recommend the use of Liquids ad Libitum. I come now to speak of those mechanical means which have contributed their aid to the removal of this Disease, viz Bandaging, Friction and exercise. The first, says Cullen, acts as a support to the parts. This is sufficiently proven by the success

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of the daily practice. The action of the absorbents is also increased, which tend to remove the accumulated fluid. Rollers of Flannel should be applied on the whole length of the anasarcaous Limb, & should also be bound to the Belly when it is much swollen. Friction with the hand or a flesh Brush as recommended by many authors of Distention, will be found serviceable. The Utility of Exercise in the removal of Anasarca accompanied with Debility is noticed by Dr Rush, & is certainly entitled to the attention of the Physicians. I might not omit to mention the great Benefit derived by Peffer Chapman from the use of the Flannel Roller. In a case which fell under his care at the Almshouse, he used the Roller, after Mortification had taken place in the Limb with the most beneficial results. Notwithstanding the administration of the Long List of Remedies which the Materia Medica affords, the Disease frequently discovers an obstinate & unrelenting character, & baffles the utmost Skill of the Practitioner. In case of this nature, when the extremities are much swollen with the accumulated fluid, it has been the

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practice of Some, to puncture the Skin & cellular membrane  
& make artificial openings for the escape of the fluid.

Blisters have also been used for the purpose of stimulating  
the part to new energy, & of restoring its functions. Nothing,  
I think can be more temerarious than this course. The  
parts are in a debilitated State, and have a disposition  
to Gangrene, which should be guarded against by  
all the efforts of the Practitioner. In many cases, I  
have no doubt, Death has been accelerated by the per-  
-suance of the above plan of treatment. As long as the  
Patient has sufficient strength to bear the impression  
of medicines, I should not despair of effecting a cure.

The Lamp of Life may faintly glimmer for a while, and  
appear to our view almost extinguished, but by the great  
restorative powers of nature, & the resources which the medi-  
-cal art affords, it may again be stimulated into action,  
and shine with renovated Splendors. — — —

